The Retreat He Called an Advance

Modibo Keïta and Mali — the Landlocked West African Country Once Ruled by France as the French Sudan; How a Teacher Who Claimed Descent From a Medieval Emperor Finished Top of the Same Colonial School Class as the Ivory Coast's Founder, Took a Communist Formation in His Own City, and Governed the Opposite Way; How He Left the French Currency and Was Forced Back Into It; How, Three Months After Admitting the Economic Failure, He Answered It by Deepening the Revolution Rather Than Correcting It; and Why That Single Sequence Explains Which Rulers Can Stop and Which Cannot — c. 1235–2026

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with Claude (Anthropic)

ORIENTATION

This volume is written to be read on its own, by someone who knows nothing of the country, the man, or the collection it belongs to. This note supplies the minimum needed to begin.

The country. Mali is a large, landlocked country in the interior of West Africa. Under French rule it was called the **French Sudan** — no relation to the modern country of Sudan on the other side of Africa — and it took the name Mali at independence in 1960, after the medieval empire that had its heartland there. It borders Senegal and Mauritania to the west, Algeria to the north, Niger to the east, and Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Guinea to the south. Its northern half is Sahara desert; its life runs along the Niger river, past Bamako, the capital, and Segou, Mopti, and Timbuktu. It was then and is now among the poorest countries on earth. Having no coastline, its trade has always depended on a railway running through Senegal to the port of Dakar.

The man. Modibo Keïta (roughly *moh-DEE-boh KAY-tah*), 1915–1977: a schoolteacher from a family claiming descent from the founder of the medieval Mali Empire; top of his class at the colonial school in Senegal; union organiser; member and then vice-president of the French National Assembly and a minister in French governments; first president of independent Mali from 1960 until soldiers removed him in 1968; died a prisoner in 1977.

The neighbours who recur. Ivory Coast (in French, Côte d'Ivoire) and its founding president **Félix Houphouët-Boigny**, who attended the same school and made the opposite choices — the comparison this volume is built on. **Senegal**, Mali's partner in a union that collapsed after sixty-two days, and the route to the sea. **Guinea** and **Sékou Touré**, whose regime this collection has examined as the region's clearest catastrophe.

The words.

École normale William Ponty — "normale" means teacher-training; the single secondary school, in Senegal, serving all eight French West African colonies, which produced most of the region's first leaders. *RDA* (Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, the African Democratic Rally) — the political party founded at Bamako in 1946 spanning all of French West Africa; *US-RDA*, the Sudanese Union, was its Malian branch and later the sole legal party. *PSP* (Parti progressiste soudanais) — the rival conservative party of chiefs and colonial officials. *GEC* (Groupes d'Études Communistes) — Communist study cells the French Communist Party planted inside the African colonies from 1943. *CFA franc* — the shared currency of France's former African colonies, guaranteed by the French treasury; Mali left it in 1962 and returned in 1984. *SOMIEX* — the state company given a monopoly over Mali's imports and exports in 1960. *Milice populaire* — the ruling party's popular militia. *Révolution active* — the "active revolution" of August 1967, under which the constitution was suspended. *CNDR* — the National Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, the body that then governed. *Métropole* — France itself, as distinct from its colonies.

Two terms belong to this collection rather than to the history. A *counterweight* is any institution a ruler does not control through which people can press grievances — a rival party, a free press, an independent court, a union. *Foreclosure* is the closing of all of them, after which pressure has nowhere to go but storage.

PREFACE

This is the second case study of the Ponty Inquiry, and it exists to test a claim.

The inquiry follows the men produced by a single colonial school in Senegal that trained the ablest boys of France's eight West African territories and supplied most of the region's founding leaders. Its purpose is not to catalogue regimes but to study human choice inside fixed constraints: to hold the formation still, identify the moments when a man's position permitted more than one answer, and see which answer he gave.

Modibo Keïta is the closest thing to a matched subject that this material offers. He and Félix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast, the inquiry's first completed case, attended the same school, finished top of their classes, spent fifteen years inside the colonial apparatus, built parties out of professional grievances, sat in the French National Assembly, and served as ministers in French governments. Then one presided over the fastest growth in West Africa for thirty-three years and the other lost his country to a lieutenant after eight. The difference in what they inherited was enormous — two deep-water ports and the world's best cocoa belt against a landlocked millet economy that lost its railway to the sea two months after independence — and this volume measures that difference before it judges anything.

The claim under test was published after the first case study: that a ruler whose authority rests on a doctrine which cannot be admitted to fail is unable to stop a repression, because the enemies the doctrine manufactures are what explain the failures it forbids him to acknowledge, whereas a ruler whose authority rests on something checkable can afford to be publicly wrong. Mali was named as the case that might break it. It does not. It supplies the mechanism with unusual precision, in two dates three months apart in 1967 — a currency devalued by half in May, and the constitution suspended in August to defend a revolution against its enemies. The refinement this volume adds is that such a doctrine does not stop a ruler admitting a policy has failed. It stops him letting the admission mean anything.

A NOTE ON THIS COLLABORATION

This book was produced in collaboration between its author and Claude, an AI model made by Anthropic. The framework and the direction are Thomas Bryan's; the research, the historical reconstruction, the prose, and the production are Claude's work, conducted under his direction and to the collection's standards.

Two of those standards did visible work here. The first is the double ledger: Keïta was not corrupt, did not enrich himself, built no camp, and died poor in detention, and the volume records all of that as fully as it records the emptied shops, the militia, and the two opposition leaders dead in a desert prison. The second is measuring the constraint before judging the man: Mali's landlocked poverty and the collapse of its union with Senegal were real and severe, and the comparison with the Ivory Coast is worthless unless that difference is subtracted first. What remains after the subtraction is what this volume claims to explain.

Load-bearing facts — the school and the class rank, the Bamako Communist study cell, the offices held in France, the collapse of the Mali Federation, the founding of the state trade monopoly, the currency of July 1962 and its devaluation on 5 May 1967, the arrests of July 1962 and the deaths at Kidal on 30 June 1964, the launch of the active revolution on 22 August 1967, the coup of 19 November 1968, and the death in custody on 16 May 1977 — were verified against current sources at the time of writing. Where circumstances are genuinely contested, above all the deaths at Kidal, the volume says so rather than choosing. One quotation is used, of a crowd's chant recorded in the sources; everything else is paraphrased.

THE ARGUMENT IN TEN PARTS

Part I — The Man and the Country (c. 1235–1915). Who he was and what he governed; a land that held one of the great medieval empires and was then made a colony without a coastline; the emperor whose dynasty gave the modern country its name; and why a country with no port has a narrower range of choices than one with two.

Part II — The Selection (1915–1934). A city boy in the colonial capital; a family tracing itself to the founder of an empire; and the difference between inheriting an office, as the Ivory Coast's founder did, and inheriting a memory of vanished greatness — one gives a man something to protect, the other a standard against which the present is humiliating.

Part III — The Formation (1934–1936). Top of the class, and the African teaching grade that was the ceiling above it; the cohort assembled on an island off Dakar; the school theatre group he ran; and the classmate from the same school whom he would one day imprison and who would die in a desert jail.

Part IV — The Intermediary Years (1936–1945). Teaching in Bamako, Sikasso, and Timbuktu; the teachers' union as the first instrument; the Communist study cell in his own city that gave him, without any journey to Europe, the doctrine this collection has elsewhere traced through Paris; and the difference between a doctrine acquired and a grievance organised.

Part V — The Turn (1945–1957). The party of the schoolteachers against the party of the chiefs, and the fifteen-year contest between them; where he stood when the African party broke with the Communists in 1950; and the decade in which a colonial subject became a minister of the French Republic and the first African vice-president of its National Assembly.

Part VI — The Inheritance (1960–1962). The union with Senegal that lasted sixty-two days and the railway to the sea that closed with it; the state monopoly that put every import and export through one office; the decision to leave the French currency; and the queues, the smuggling, and the return to barter that followed within two years.

Part VII — The Foreclosure (1962–1966). The traders who marched in Bamako three weeks after the new currency and the arrests three days later; two former French deputies condemned to death, commuted, and dead at Kidal in 1964; the single list of eighty candidates; and the party militia that made the doctrine a thing citizens met at a market stall.

Part VIII — The Three Months That Answer the Question (1967–1968). The devaluation of 5 May 1967, in which he admitted the economic failure and began the retreat toward the French currency; the active revolution of 22 August 1967, in which he suspended the constitution to defend the revolution against its enemies; why the second followed the first and not the reverse; and the fifteen months from there to the soldiers.

Part IX — The Decision Points (1936–1968). The six moments when his position permitted more than one answer — the study cell, the 1950 break, federation against territory, the currency, the reading of the traders' march, and August 1967 — each set beside a man in a comparable position who answered differently.

Part X — The Ledger (1968–2026). A lieutenant's twenty-three years, a real democracy, and a country that has since lost control of its own north; the double ledger in both columns; the hypotheses scored and the six dials read; the counter-positions held; and the refinement this case forces on the inquiry's central claim.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

This volume rests on the biographical and historical record of Modibo Keïta and of Mali, verified for this study, and the principal debts are recorded here in the collection's manner — by argument rather than apparatus.

The landscape of Part I follows the standard histories of the Mali Empire and its successors, of the French conquest and the administration of the French Sudan, and of the Office du Niger irrigation scheme. The life follows the biographical record: the birth at Bamako-Coura on 4 June 1915 to Daba Keita and Fatoumata Camara, the family's claimed descent from Sundiata Keita, the primary schooling from 1924, the École normale William Ponty and his first place in the class, teaching from 1936 at Bamako, Sikasso, and Tombouctou, the coordination of the school art and theatre group in 1937, the West African teachers' union founded with Ouezzin Coulibaly, membership of the Bamako cell of the *Groupes d'Études Communistes*, the anti-colonial magazine of 1943 and the brief imprisonment of 1946, the founding of the Sudanese Union with Mamadou Konaté and the secretary-generalship from 1947, the territorial assembly of 1948, the mayoralty of Bamako and the French National Assembly seat of 1956, the two secretaryships of state in the governments of Bourgès-Maunoury and Gaillard, and the vice-presidency of the French National Assembly.

On the regime: the Mali Federation of 1959 and its collapse in August 1960, the proclamation of the Republic on 22 September 1960, the creation of SOMIEX in October 1960 and its monopoly over imports and exports, the introduction of the Malian franc on 1 July 1962 at par with the CFA franc, the demonstrations of 20 July 1962 and the arrests of 23 July, the trial and death sentences of Fily Dabo Sissoko and Hamadoun Dicko, their commutation and their deaths at Kidal on 30 June 1964, the single list of eighty US-RDA candidates in 1964, the conduct of the *milice populaire*, the devaluation of 5 May 1967 and the Franco-Malian monetary agreements, the launch of the *révolution active* on 22 August 1967 with the suspension of the constitution and the creation of the CNDR, the coup of 19 November 1968, the imprisonment at Kidal, the transfer to Bamako in February 1977 and the death on 16 May 1977 rest on the standard record and the currency and economic literature; the reorientation of Malian trade toward the Western economies after 1967 is drawn from the contemporary economic reporting of the period. Mali's readoption of the CFA franc in 1984 and the events from the 1991 overthrow of Moussa Traoré through the collapse of 2012, the interventions that followed, the coups of 2020 and 2021, and the Sahel alliance and its currency debate were verified at the time of writing.

Within the collection this volume stands on *The Machine That Runs Itself*, *The Seedbed*, *The Other Apparatus* — whose Part VIII claim it tests and refines — *The Paris Apparatus*, and the three volumes against which it is measured: *The Peace He Could Not Bequeath*, whose subject sat in the same classroom and chose otherwise; *The Plot That Would Not End*, whose subject took the doctrine further; and *The Unromantic Liberation*, whose subject held one and revised it. The errors that survive this apparatus are the production's own.

PART I

The Man and the Country

Who he was and what he governed, stated plainly; a land that had been the seat of one of the great medieval empires and was then made a colony without a coastline; the emperor whose name and dynasty the modern country took; how France conquered it, ruled it as a supplier of labour and cotton, and left it dependent on a railway running through someone else's territory; and why a country with no port has a narrower range of choices than one with two — c. 1235–1915

I. The Man and the Country

This volume is about one man and one country, and it assumes no prior knowledge of either.

The man is Modibo Keïta — the surname is pronounced roughly *KAY-tah*. He was born in 1915 in Bamako, trained by the French colonial system as a schoolteacher, finished top of his class at the single secondary school France maintained for its whole West African empire, taught for a decade, built a political party out of a teachers' union, served as a minister in French governments in Paris, and then governed his country from independence in 1960 until soldiers removed him in 1968. He died in prison in 1977.

The country is Mali. Under French rule it was called the French Sudan — a name that has nothing to do with the modern country of Sudan on the other side of the continent — and it took the name Mali at independence, after the medieval empire whose heartland it had been. It sits in the interior of West Africa, and the single most important fact about it is that it has no coastline. It is bordered by Senegal and Mauritania to the west, Algeria to the north, Niger to the east, and Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, and Guinea to the south. Most of its northern half is Sahara desert; its life runs along the Niger river, which loops through the middle of the country past Bamako, Segou, Mopti, and Timbuktu. It was then, and remains now, one of the poorest countries on earth.

Three neighbours recur here. **Ivory Coast** — in French, Côte d'Ivoire — is the coastal country to the south whose founding president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, attended the same school as Keïta, made the opposite choices, and is the subject of this inquiry's first case study; the comparison between the two men is the reason this volume exists. **Senegal**, to the west, was Mali's partner in a short-lived union in 1960 and controls the railway line that was Mali's route to the sea. **Guinea**, to the south-west, was governed by Sékou Touré, whose regime this collection has examined as the region's clearest catastrophe.

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II. What This Volume Is Testing

This collection studies rulers structurally: what a man inherits, what his position permits, and what happens to the people below him. But the reason for studying several men from one school is narrower. It is to hold the formation still and watch the choices — to find the moments when circumstances allowed more than one answer, and see which answer each man gave.

Keïta is the test case the inquiry most needed, because he and Houphouët-Boigny are as close to matched subjects as history supplies. Both were educated at the same colonial school in Senegal; both finished first in their class; both taught or practised inside the colonial apparatus for fifteen years; both built mass parties out of professional grievances; both sat in the French National Assembly, and both served as ministers in French governments before independence. Then Ivory Coast became the fastest-growing economy in West Africa under a president who died in office after thirty-three years, and Mali became a socialist state that ran out of money, jailed its opposition, and lost its president to a lieutenant's coup after eight.

The volume also tests a specific claim this project published after the first case study. That claim was that a ruler whose authority rests on a doctrine which cannot be admitted to fail is unable to stop a repression once he starts it, because the enemies the doctrine manufactures are what explain the failures it forbids him to acknowledge — whereas a ruler whose authority rests on something checkable, such as delivered prosperity, can afford to be publicly wrong. Houphouët-Boigny fabricated conspiracies and then, in 1971, released the prisoners and said he had been misled. The question here is what a man does when the doctrine is load-bearing and the results are bad. Part VIII contains the answer, and it turns on three months in 1967.

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III. The Empire in the Name

The landscape begins with a memory, and in Mali's case the memory is unusually precise and unusually grand. In the thirteenth century a ruler called Sundiata Keita founded the Mali Empire in this territory — a state that at its height controlled the West African gold trade, stretched from the Atlantic to beyond the Niger bend, and endowed at Timbuktu and Djenné a scholarly civilisation whose manuscript libraries and mud-brick mosques survive. Its most famous emperor, Mansa Musa, made a pilgrimage to Mecca in the 1320s so laden with gold that it disturbed the currency of Egypt. The dynasty Sundiata founded bore the name Keita.

The man in this book was born into a family that claimed direct descent from it, and when his country became independent he named it Mali, after the empire. The framework asks the reader to register what this supplies and what it does not. It supplies a loaded memory of the most usable kind: proof, fixed in the historical record and known to every schoolchild, that this soil once carried a state of the first rank. It does not supply a nation. The empire had fallen apart by the seventeenth century; the Songhai empire rose and fell after it; the Bambara kingdoms of Segou and Kaarta, the Fula states, and in the nineteenth century the conquering Islamic empire of Umar Tall all occupied parts of the same ground. What France conquered in the 1880s and 1890s and assembled as the French Sudan was not the Mali Empire restored but a wide stretch of savanna and desert containing Bambara, Fula, Songhai, Soninke, Dogon, Tuareg, and others, whose only common feature was the border France drew around them.

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IV. The Colony Without a Coast

France ruled the French Sudan as an interior supplier, and three features of that arrangement set the limits of everything the man in this book would later be able to do.

First, it had no port. Everything the colony sold and everything it bought moved by rail to Dakar, in Senegal — the Dakar–Niger railway, completed in the colonial period, which ran through another territory to reach the sea. A country whose entire external trade depends on a line crossing a neighbour's ground is a country whose foreign policy has a permanent hostage in it.

Second, it was poor in the things the colonial economy valued. There was no cocoa here and no coffee: the south grew millet, sorghum, and groundnuts, the north herded animals, and the great colonial investment was the Office du Niger, an ambitious irrigation scheme begun in the 1930s to grow cotton and rice on the inland delta, worked substantially by labour recruited from elsewhere in the federation and never approaching the yields its planners promised. The colony's largest export was, in a real sense, people: men requisitioned or recruited to work on the plantations and construction of richer territories to the south.

Third — and this matters for Part V — the French Sudan had a genuine indigenous elite of a particular type: Muslim clerical families, the descendants of the old ruling dynasties, and the chiefs France governed through, alongside a small stratum of educated clerks and teachers. Politics after 1945 would divide along the seam between those two groups, and the party of the chiefs and the party of the schoolteachers would fight each other for fifteen years before one of them jailed the other.

Into this colony — landlocked, poor, ruled through chiefs, carrying the name of a lost empire — a boy was born in Bamako in 1915.

PART II

The Selection

A city boy in the colonial capital; a family that traced itself to the founder of an empire; the primary school and the examination that took him out of the territory; and how a claim of imperial descent functioned in a colonial society that had abolished the empire but not the memory of it — 1915–1934

I. Bamako-Coura

He was born on 4 June 1915 in Bamako-Coura, a quarter of Bamako, the administrative capital of the French Sudan, the son of Daba Keita and Fatoumata Camara, in a Muslim family that claimed descent from the founders of the Mali Empire. He began primary schooling in the colonial capital in 1924.

The volume marks the difference from the first case study, because the two men's starting positions were not identical and the inquiry must not pretend otherwise. Houphouët-Boigny was born into a functioning chiefly household in a rural village and was made a chief at the age of five; his authority was an office he held, revocable by nobody, and he came to the colonial school already possessing standing that the school could not confer. Keïta's inheritance was of a different kind: a name and a claimed lineage reaching back seven centuries to a state that no longer existed. It conferred prestige and no office. It was a memory, not an address.

The framework notes what a memory of that sort does that an office does not. An office gives a man something to protect and a stake in arrangements continuing. A memory of vanished greatness gives him a standard against which the present is humiliating — the knowledge that this soil once held an empire whose gold unsettled Cairo, and now holds a colony that exports its young men to cut other people's cocoa. Both men had a relation to precolonial authority. One had a job in it; the other had a comparison with it. The inquiry proposes, and later parts test, that this difference is one of the reasons the first man spent his life improving arrangements and the second spent his trying to replace them.

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II. The Ladder Out

The route out of the colony was the one *The Seedbed* described: a competitive examination, open in principle across the whole of French West Africa, leading to the single federal secondary school in Senegal. He won it. Somewhere around 1934 he left Bamako for the École normale William Ponty — the words mean, roughly, teacher-training college — situated at that time on the island of Gorée off Dakar.

He arrived, on the evidence of what he did there, formidable. He finished at the top of his class. And he arrived, unlike a chief's son, with nothing to fall back on: for a boy of a prestigious but powerless lineage in a poor colony, the examination was the whole of the future.

PART III

The Formation

What the school installed, and the ceiling it installed with it; the cohort he met on an island off Dakar and would meet again as ministers, rivals, and prisoners; the theatre group he ran; and the classmate he would one day imprison — 1934–1936

I. Top of the Class, and the Grade Below the Ceiling

He completed the teaching course and graduated first. What that qualified him to be was a teacher in the colonial primary system — the African cadre, on African pay, under French inspectors, with no route into the metropolitan teaching profession and no possibility of the higher French qualifications. The pattern the previous brief identified as the cohort's defining experience is present here exactly as it was for Houphouët-Boigny, who finished first in the federal medical school and was awarded the deliberately inferior grade of *médecin africain*, the "African doctor". Two men, two disciplines, one message: you are the best we have, and here is the ceiling we built for you.

He began teaching in 1936, and taught in Bamako, in Sikasso in the south, and in Timbuktu in the desert north — which meant that he saw, in his twenties, most of the territory he would govern, in the specific way a teacher sees a place.

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II. The Cohort, and What Became of It

The school's real product, as this inquiry has argued throughout, was not knowledge but acquaintance across colonial borders. Keïta's case supplies the clearest illustration in the collection of the fact that this network ran in both directions.

He met there, or in the same milieu, the men who would run West Africa. In 1937 he coordinated the school's art and theatre group — the celebrated Ponty theatre, in which students dramatised material from their own regions, and which this inquiry has read as cultural nationalism arriving as an unintended by-product of good colonial pedagogy. With Ouezzin Coulibaly of Upper Volta, another graduate, he founded the teachers' union that spanned French West Africa. When the federation-wide political party was founded in October 1946, it was founded in his own city, Bamako.

And among the graduates of the same school was Fily Dabo Sissoko, born in 1900, a Ponty man, a poet of the négritude movement, the son of a traditional ruler, and the leader of the conservative party of chiefs and colonial officials that opposed Keïta's socialists throughout the 1950s. In 1962 Keïta had him arrested. In 1964 he died in a prison in the desert at Kidal. The dormitory that assembled a generation to end an empire also assembled the men who would jail each other afterwards, and Mali is where that shows most starkly.

PART IV

The Intermediary Years

The decade inside the colonial apparatus that most accounts pass over; the teachers' union as the first instrument; the Communist study cell in Bamako that gave him, without any journey to Europe, the formation this collection has traced through Paris; the anti-colonial magazine and the arrest; and the difference between a doctrine acquired and a grievance organised — 1936–1945

I. The Union

He taught for a decade, and in that decade he did what the cohort characteristically did: he organised the people around him. The teachers of French West Africa were a natural constituency — educated, underpaid, spread across every territory, and acutely conscious of the gap between what they did and what they were paid for doing it — and the union he helped found with Ouezzin Coulibaly gave him, in his twenties, a federation-wide organisation and a reputation.

The reader should mark the parallel with the first case study and then the divergence. Houphouët-Boigny, in the same years, organised his fellow African medical staff against the preferential treatment of Europeans, and was punished with a posting to the far edge of his colony. Both men began with a professional grievance about differential treatment; both built an association to press it; both were treated by the administration as troublemakers. To this point their careers are the same career. What happened next was not the same.

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II. The Cell in Bamako

Keïta joined the Communist study group in Bamako.

These groups — in French, *Groupes d'Études Communistes* — were cells the French Communist Party established inside the African colonies from 1943 onward, expressly to give Africans a structured Marxist formation locally. The reader of this collection's other volumes should register what this means. The catastrophes this project has anatomised were produced, in large part, by colonial students who travelled to Paris, were taken up by the Communist Party there, and returned home with a doctrine of total social transformation. Keïta never made that journey. The doctrine came to him — in his own city, while he was working as a schoolteacher, delivered by an apparatus that had decided it was more efficient to build the cells in Africa than to wait for Africans to arrive in France.

In 1943 he helped produce an anti-colonial magazine, and in 1946 the French briefly imprisoned him for his political activity. He was, by the end of the war, a man with three things: an organisation, a doctrine, and a prison record.

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III. What the Two Formations Combine Into

The framework now states the hypothesis this volume exists to test, in the form it will be tested.

Houphouët-Boigny left the colonial ladder with the craft of rule and no doctrine. He had a specific, material, entirely accurate grievance — Africans were paid less for identical work and received less for identical crops — and his politics for the rest of his life consisted of pressing that grievance through whatever instrument was available, including, when it suited him, the Communists.

Keïta left with the craft of rule *and* a doctrine. The administrative formation was identical; the addition was a systematic theory that explained the colonial situation as an instance of a general historical process, specified where history was going, and identified who stood in its way. The inquiry's proposition is that this addition changes nothing about a ruler's competence and everything about what he does when his policies fail — because a man holding a general theory of history has an explanation available for failure that a man holding a grievance about producer prices does not. Parts VII and VIII test it.

PART V

The Turn

How the teachers' union became a party; the fifteen-year war between the schoolteachers and the chiefs for control of the colony; the alliance with the French Communists and where he stood when it was broken; and the extraordinary decade in which a colonial subject sat in French cabinets and presided over the parliament of the empire — 1945–1957

I. The Party of the Schoolteachers

At the end of the war France opened representation to its African subjects, and the political landscape of the French Sudan divided immediately along the seam Part I identified. On one side stood the Progressive Sudanese Party, founded in December 1945 by Fily Dabo Sissoko and Hamadoun Dicko — both of them chiefs' sons, both former officials, a party of traditional rulers and African functionaries of the administration, seeking a gradual independence that would preserve the position of the existing elite. On the other stood the Sudanese Union, which Keïta founded with Mamadou Konaté and led as secretary-general from 1947, and which merged into the federation-wide African Democratic Rally at its founding congress in Bamako in October 1946: a party of teachers, clerks, and unionists, organised on the union model, hostile to the chiefs, and committed to a transformation rather than a transfer.

The struggle between them ran for over a decade, and the schoolteachers won it: in the regional elections of 1957 the chiefs' party was decisively beaten, and by the eve of independence Keïta's organisation had absorbed or destroyed its rival. The framework marks that this was a genuine political victory in a genuinely competitive contest — and that the man who won it would, within five years of independence, imprison the man he had beaten.

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II. The Alliance and the Break

The African deputies who went to Paris after 1946 were too few to form a parliamentary group and affiliated with the Communists in order to be heard; this inquiry has established that the affiliation was near-universal and therefore tells us nothing about anyone's convictions. What tells us something is October 1950, when the leader of the federation-wide party, Houphouët-Boigny, broke the Communist alliance under pressure from the French government and reoriented toward cooperation with France.

Keïta did not follow that logic in spirit. His party remained the left wing of the movement; his own formation had come through the Communist study cell rather than through a tactical arrangement in a parliamentary lobby; and where Houphouët-Boigny spent the 1950s building a relationship with French governments, Keïta spent them building a party whose programme was social transformation. When the two men divided over whether the eight territories should confront France as a single West African federation or one by one, Keïta was for federation and Houphouët-Boigny for territory — the position, as the previous brief noted, that tracked each man's economic interest with some precision, since Ivory Coast was rich and would have subsidised the others, and Mali was poor and landlocked and needed them.

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III. Inside the Empire's Own Parliament

And yet — this is the fact that most complicates any simple reading of him — Keïta's career inside the French system went further than almost anyone's. Elected to the territorial assembly in 1948; mayor of Bamako and deputy to the French National Assembly in 1956; secretary of state in two French governments in Paris; and, in 1957, elected vice-president of the French National Assembly, the first African to hold the office.

The volume asks the reader to hold that beside the first case study without deciding prematurely what it means. Both of these men — the one later called France's client and the one later called Africa's socialist — served as ministers of the French Republic and sat at the summit of the imperial legislature within the same eighteen months. Whatever separated them, it was not that one collaborated and the other did not. Both worked

the metropolitan machinery as far as it would take them. They differed in what they intended to do with a state once they had one.

In 1958 the French Sudan voted, like almost every other territory, to accept continued association with France. In 1959 it joined with Senegal to form the Mali Federation, with Keïta as its head of government; the Federation took independence on 20 June 1960. Two months later it broke apart, and the country he actually inherited was not the one he had spent fifteen years working for.

PART VI

The Inheritance

What he actually took charge of after the union with Senegal collapsed and the railway to the sea was closed; the state monopoly that put every import and export through one office; the decision to leave the French currency and print his own; and the queues, the empty shops, the smuggling, and the return to barter that followed within two years — 1960–1962

I. The Country That Was Left

The Mali Federation lasted sixty-two days as an independent state. Senegal seceded on 20 August 1960; the union broke in acrimony; and on 22 September the former French Sudan proclaimed itself the Republic of Mali, with Keïta as president.

The volume insists on what this did to his position, because a fair comparison with the Ivory Coast case is impossible without it. The federation had been the whole strategy. It was supposed to give a landlocked, poor territory the scale to bargain with France, a shared administration, and — the material point — guaranteed access to the port of Dakar along the railway that was Mali's only economical route to the sea. Its collapse left Keïta governing an interior country of some four and a half million people, with no coastline, a broken relationship with the neighbour whose territory its trade had to cross, a rail link that ceased to function normally, one of the lowest incomes on earth, and an economy whose principal exports were groundnuts, cotton, and livestock.

Set that beside what Houphouët-Boigny inherited in the same year: two deep-water ports, the world's most valuable cocoa belt, a coffee crop, a French garrison, French technicians, and a currency guaranteed by the French treasury. The framework does not offer this as an excuse and will not use it as one. It offers it as the measurement of the constraint. Any claim that the difference between Mali's and Ivory Coast's outcomes proves something about the two presidents must first subtract the difference between a landlocked millet economy and a coastal cocoa economy — and what remains after that subtraction is the proper subject of this volume.

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II. The Monopoly

What he did with it was to build a socialist state. In October 1960 the government created SOMIEX — the Malian Import and Export Company — a state enterprise holding a monopoly over the export of Malian products and the import and internal distribution of manufactured and food goods. Sugar, tea, powdered milk, rice, cotton, textiles: the state bought and the state sold. Agriculture was to be progressively socialised, with state farms and cooperatives; the commercial sector was to be squeezed out; and Mali aligned itself with the Eastern bloc, taking Soviet and Chinese aid and advisers, and withdrew from the French Community.

The framework recognises the pattern from the Guinea volume and marks the crucial difference in scale and intention: this was a state monopoly imposed on trade, not the destruction of an entire coordinating apparatus. The schools stayed open, the clinics stayed open, the administration went on functioning — this was, after all, a government of trained administrators. What was destroyed was the market, and specifically the merchant class, the traders who had moved goods across a vast interior territory for centuries along routes older than the colony.

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III. The Currency

Then, on 1 July 1962, came the decision that defines his economic record. Mali left the CFA franc — the shared, French-guaranteed currency of the former colonies — and issued its own money, the Malian franc, at par with the currency it replaced.

The reasoning was serious and this volume will not caricature it. A currency issued and guaranteed by the former colonial power is a real constraint on an independent state: it limits monetary policy, ties the economy to French decisions, and leaves the reserves and the ultimate authority in Paris. Keïta wanted the state to be able to finance its own development, and a country that cannot print money cannot do that. Sovereignty over money is a real attribute of sovereignty, and he said so.

The results were catastrophic and arrived fast. The Malian franc was a currency nobody outside Mali wanted, in a landlocked country wholly dependent on imports that now had to be paid for in foreign exchange it could not earn. Inflation ran hard. The shops emptied. Queues formed for basic goods that the state monopoly was supposed to supply and could not. Smuggling became the real economy — goods moving across long, unpoliceable borders into Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Guinea — and in parts of the countryside people went back to barter. The merchant class the state had squeezed did not disappear; it went underground, where it could not be taxed and could not be controlled, and where the regime could interpret its survival as sabotage.

Within two years of independence, the economy that was supposed to demonstrate the doctrine was demonstrating the opposite. What a ruler does at that moment is the subject of the rest of this volume.

PART VII

The Foreclosure

How the one-party state closed in on a country whose currency had failed; the merchants who marched in Bamako in July 1962 and the arrests three days later; two former French deputies condemned to death, commuted, and dead in a desert prison two years afterwards; the single list of eighty candidates; and the party militia that made surveillance a daily fact — 1962–1966

I. The March and the Arrests

On 20 July 1962, three weeks after the new currency was introduced, the traders of Bamako came out into the streets. Their grievance was economic and immediate: the monetary reform was destroying their businesses. Some of the demonstrators gathered near the French embassy, and what they chanted has been recorded — *down with the Malian franc, down with Modibo, long live General de Gaulle*.

The government read the crowd as the hand of the political opposition, and on 23 July the arrests began. Among those taken were Fily Dabo Sissoko and Hamadoun Dicko — the two leaders of the defeated chiefs' party, both former deputies of the French National Assembly, both former members of French governments, and Sissoko a graduate of the same school as the president who was now jailing him. They were charged with endangering the security of the state and tried before a special popular court. Both were condemned to death; both sentences were commuted; both men were imprisoned at Kidal, deep in the desert north. Both died there, on the same day, 30 June 1964, in circumstances that remain contested and have never been satisfactorily explained.

The framework asks the reader to see the mechanism, because it is the one this collection has traced in every volume. A policy failed. The failure produced a protest by exactly the people the policy had ruined. The protest was not read as information about the policy; it was read as evidence of a conspiracy. And the response was not to revisit the currency but to arrest the opposition. The chanting of de Gaulle's name made the reading easier — here, apparently, was the proof that the regime's opponents were the instruments of the former colonial power — but the reading came first and the evidence was fitted to it.

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II. The Party and the Militia

The rest followed the pattern this inquiry has documented across the cohort, arriving faster here than elsewhere. The Sudanese Union was the only legal party. In the first post-independence elections in 1964 a single list of eighty of its candidates was returned to the National Assembly, and the legislature re-elected the president. Rival organisations were absorbed; the press was the party's; the assembly ratified.

What Mali added, and what distinguishes it from Ivory Coast, was the *milice populaire* — the party's popular militia, a youth formation empowered to enforce the revolution in the streets and markets. It patrolled neighbourhoods, policed trade, checked papers, denounced hoarders and speculators, and, by the general testimony of the period, beat people. The framework notes precisely what a party militia is in structural terms: it is a coercive instrument outside the ordinary chain of administrative and legal accountability, answerable to the party rather than to the state, and its existence converts ideological enthusiasm into a daily physical fact for ordinary people. Ivory Coast under Houphouët-Boigny had secret trials and a massacre, and it did not have this. A regime that puts young enthusiasts in the streets with authority over their neighbours has made the doctrine into something a citizen meets at the market stall.

The volume enters the credit column here too, because it is real. The regime pursued the abolition of what remained of hereditary servitude, particularly in the north, campaigning to free people still held in dependency by traditional chiefs — a genuine attack on an old injustice that the colonial administration had tolerated for sixty years because the chiefs were useful to it. It expanded schooling. It asserted a cultural nationalism that gave a poor country a version of itself it could be proud of. And it did all this in the manner the framework predicts of an administrative elite: from above, by decree, without asking.

PART VIII

The Three Months That Answer the Question

The devaluation of May 1967 in which he admitted the economic failure and began the retreat back toward the French currency; the deepening of the revolution in August 1967, in which he suspended the constitution and created a committee to defend the revolution against its enemies; why the second act followed the first by three months and not the other way round; and the fifteen months from there to the soldiers — 1967–1968

I. The Retreat

By 1967 the position was untenable. The currency had lost value against the money of every neighbour; the shops were empty; foreign exchange had run out; and the state could not finance the imports on which a landlocked country lives. The government negotiated with France, and on 5 May 1967 the Malian franc was devalued by fifty per cent as part of monetary agreements that began Mali's return toward the franc zone and, with it, toward the French financial system it had left five years earlier.

The volume states plainly what this was: a correction, and a serious one. He had tried monetary sovereignty, it had failed on the evidence, and he retreated. Measured on the doctrine dial this project uses, that is a point in the tested column, and the inquiry records it as such. A ruler holding a genuinely unfalsifiable creed does not devalue his own sovereign currency by half and reopen negotiations with the former colonial power.

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II. The Advance

And then, on 22 August 1967 — three months and seventeen days later — he launched what he called the *révolution active*, the active revolution. He suspended the constitution. He dissolved the party's political bureau and the National Assembly. He created a new body, the National Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, to rule in their place, and he empowered the popular militia further, in a campaign of ideological mobilisation that owed a good deal to what was then unfolding in China.

The framework asks the reader to hold the two dates together, because their order is the finding of this volume and, this project believes, one of the more useful things it has established.

He did not deepen the revolution and then, when that failed, retreat. He retreated first — admitting, in the most public and humiliating way available to a head of state, that the central economic project of his presidency had not worked — and then, within three months, answered that admission by declaring the revolution to be in danger and taking emergency powers to defend it.

This is what a doctrine that cannot be allowed to fail does to the man holding it. The economic facts were undeniable and he did not deny them; he was a competent administrator and he could read a balance of payments. But the meaning of those facts was not available to him. He could not say what Houphouët-Boigny said in 1971 — *I was misled, and I am releasing the prisoners* — because Houphouët-Boigny's authority rested on delivered prosperity, which was still being delivered, so an admission of error cost him nothing structural. Keïta's authority rested on the doctrine itself. There was no prosperity to point to. If the socialist programme was simply wrong, then nothing remained. So the failure had to be reassigned: not *the policy was mistaken* but *the revolution has been insufficiently pursued, and its enemies have grown bold*. The retreat had to be called an advance, and a committee had to be created to defend the thing that had just been abandoned.

The inquiry published, after its first case study, the claim that a ruler whose power does not rest on an unfalsifiable doctrine is able to stop a repression, while one whose power does rest on such a doctrine is not. Mali was named as the test that could break it. It does not break it. It supplies the mechanism in an unusually clean form, with the dates three months apart, and it adds a refinement the first case could not have shown: such a ruler can correct a *policy* — Keïta devalued — but he cannot correct the *doctrine*, and when the two come into conflict he will pay for the policy retreat with a political escalation. The economics were debugged. The politics were defended. And the escalation is what killed him.

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III. Fifteen Months

The militia's conduct under the active revolution generated exactly the unrest the framework predicts when a coercive instrument is turned loose on a population already short of food and money. Discontent spread to the army, which had watched a party militia acquire powers it did not have.

On 19 November 1968 a group of junior officers led by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré overthrew the government without significant resistance. Keïta was arrested and sent to prison at Kidal — the same desert town where Sissoko and Dicko had died four years earlier. He was moved to Bamako in February 1977, in what the government described as a step toward national reconciliation and possible release, and he died there, still a prisoner, on 16 May 1977. He was sixty-one. His death was widely believed in Mali not to have been natural, and it produced demonstrations that the government suppressed.

PART IX

The Decision Points

The moments when his position permitted more than one answer; what he chose; who in a comparable position chose otherwise; and what each choice cost — the section this inquiry exists for — 1936–1968

I. Where the Choosing Happened

The constraint on Modibo Keïta was severe and this volume has measured it: a landlocked country, among the poorest on earth, with no valuable export, dependent on a railway through a neighbour that had just broken with him. A great deal of what happened to Mali follows from that and would have followed under any president. But not all of it, and the difference is visible at six points.

The cell, in the early 1940s. He joined the Communist study group in Bamako. The alternative was the one most of his cohort took: organise the union, press the grievance, and take no general theory of history on board. Houphouët-Boigny, in the same years, was building a planters' syndicate and reading a price list. This is the earliest divergence between them and, this volume argues, the one that determined the rest.

The break, October 1950. When the federation-wide party abandoned its Communist alliance under French pressure, Keïta did not follow the logic. Others in identical positions did — Diori in Niger, Maga in Dahomey, Houphouët-Boigny himself. The pressures were the same; the answers were not.

Federation or territory, 1956–58. He chose federation; Houphouët-Boigny chose territory. Here the choice tracks material interest so closely that the inquiry treats it as position rather than conviction: a rich coastal colony had everything to lose from federation and a poor landlocked one had everything to gain.

The currency, July 1962. This is the decision most clearly his, and the most consequential. Nothing forced it. Every other former French colony in West Africa except Guinea stayed in the shared currency; Mali's structural position — landlocked, import-dependent, without exportable wealth — made it the country least able to afford an unwanted money, which is precisely the argument for why he should not have done it and precisely the reason he did. It was a sovereignty decision taken against an economic constraint, and the constraint won inside five years.

The response to the traders, July 1962. Merchants ruined by a monetary reform marched in the capital. He could have read this as information about the reform. He read it as conspiracy and arrested the opposition, including a man he had sat in school with. Houphouët-Boigny, faced in 1977 with market women marching on his palace over the persecution of trade, retreated and restored private commerce. Two rulers, two crowds of traders, two readings.

August 1967. Having devalued in May, he could have followed the correction through: eased the monopoly, made peace with the merchants, and let the retreat be a retreat. He deepened the revolution instead. This is the decision that has no structural necessity in it at all — the economy was already being corrected, and the political escalation made everything worse and cost him his government fifteen months later. It is the clearest instance in this volume of a doctrine, rather than a circumstance, choosing.

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II. What the Comparison Yields

The two men were matched at the start to a degree that history rarely supplies: same school, same rank in their class, same decade, same union route into politics, same seats in the same French parliament, same ministerial offices in the same French governments. They were not matched in what they inherited, and the volume has insisted on that. But the six decision points above are not explained by the difference between cocoa and millet. They are explained by what each man carried out of the 1940s: one a grievance about prices, one a theory of history.

The grievance man improved things materially and closed his country politically and could admit error because his legitimacy did not depend on being right. The theory man attempted a transformation, hit a constraint, corrected the policy, could not correct the theory, and escalated to protect it. Neither of them opened a political

channel. Both were removed from the record by their own mortality or by soldiers. But their peoples' experience differed enormously, and it differed most in the years after each man's project failed — because one had somewhere to retreat to and the other had only somewhere further to advance.

PART X

The Ledger

The aftermath, from a lieutenant's twenty-three years to a country that has lost control of its own north; the double ledger in both columns; the three hypotheses scored; the six dials read; the strongest counter-positions held; and what this case does to the inquiry's claims — 1968–2026

I. What Came After

Moussa Traoré, the lieutenant who removed him, ruled Mali for twenty-three years — longer than Keïta — under a military committee and then a single party of his own, and was himself overthrown in March 1991 after his soldiers fired on demonstrators. Mali then did something most of this collection's countries did not: it built a real democracy, holding competitive elections from 1992 and transferring power peacefully more than once across two decades.

It did not hold. In 2012 a rebellion in the north, reinforced by fighters and weapons returning from the collapse of Libya, overran the northern half of the country; the army mutinied and removed the elected president; and armed Islamist groups took Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal, destroying manuscripts and shrines of the civilisation described in Part I. A French military intervention pushed them out of the towns in 2013 and a large United Nations mission followed, but the insurgency spread south and never ended. In August 2020 soldiers again removed an elected president; in May 2021 the same officers removed the transitional government they had installed; French forces withdrew in 2022 and Russian contractors took their place; and Mali, with Burkina Faso and Niger, formed an alliance of Sahel juntas and left the West African regional bloc. In 2026 the country is governed by soldiers, large parts of its territory are outside government control, and its rulers are once again publicly debating leaving the French-backed currency for a money of their own.

The framework declines the tidy irony and states the structural point instead. The specific question Keïta answered in 1962 — whether a poor landlocked Sahelian state can hold monetary sovereignty against the economics of its position — is open again, being asked by men who invoke his memory, in a country now poorer relative to its neighbours than it was when he asked it.

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II. The Ledger, Both Columns

Credit. He was a genuine and consequential anti-colonial leader who spent fifteen years building a mass party from a teachers' union and beat the party of the chiefs in real elections. He attacked hereditary servitude in the north, which the colonial administration had tolerated for sixty years. He expanded schooling in one of the least schooled countries on earth. He gave a poor territory a national identity of real dignity, reaching back to a genuine imperial past. He kept the machinery of the state running — the schools, the clinics, the administration — and Mali under him suffered no famine and no mass killing. He pursued African unity with more seriousness and at more personal cost than almost any contemporary. And in 1967 he devalued his own currency by half rather than let the country starve for a symbol, which is a real correction and is entered as one.

Debit. His central economic decisions — the trade monopoly and the currency — impoverished a country that had almost nothing to spare, emptied its shops, drove its commerce into smuggling, and reduced parts of it to barter. He closed the political system completely within two years of independence. He imprisoned the leaders of the defeated opposition on charges arising from an economic protest, and two of them, including a former classmate and fellow graduate of his school, died in a desert prison in circumstances never explained. He put a party militia into the streets with authority over ordinary people's daily lives. And in August 1967, facing the failure of his programme, he suspended the constitution and deepened the revolution rather than correcting it — the decision that ended his government, and with it Mali's first experiment in self-rule.

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III. Hypotheses and Dials

The inquiry's three readings score very differently here than in the Ivory Coast. The **client** hypothesis fails almost entirely: he left the French Community, left the currency, took Soviet and Chinese aid, and had no French defence accord — and the volume notes for Part IX of the framework that Mali is therefore evidence on the confound question, since the country with no French garrison is the country where the coup succeeded. The **nationalist** hypothesis scores strongly: whatever else he was, he pursued Malian and African autonomy at real and eventually fatal cost to himself. The **personal ruler** hypothesis scores fully: single party, single list, militia, opposition dead in prison, constitution suspended.

The dials read thus. **Sovereignty:** the autonomous extreme of the cohort, and the volume's central irony is that the pursuit of autonomy produced dependence, since by 1969 the great majority of Mali's trade had reoriented toward the capitalist economies and France had recovered its commercial position. **Doctrine:** mixed, and this is the finding — tested on policy, where he devalued against his own commitments; unfalsifiable on the doctrine itself, which he defended by escalation at the very moment the policy retreat proved it wrong. **Foreclosure:** total, and faster than anywhere else in the cohort. **Metabolism:** the administration preserved, the market destroyed — the distinctive Malian pattern, and the reason there were queues rather than graves. **Cost direction:** the costs of the doctrine fell on the governed in shortage and surveillance, and finally on him in a desert prison; unlike several in this collection, he did not enrich himself. **Exit:** coup, then nine years of detention, then death in custody at sixty-one.

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IV. The Counter-Positions, Held

Three objections deserve their strongest form. The first is the constraint objection: that Mali was landlocked, penniless, and abandoned by Senegal, and that no president could have made it prosper, so judging Keïta against Houphouët-Boigny is judging millet against cocoa. The volume grants most of this and has built it into Part VI. It answers narrowly: the constraint explains poverty; it does not explain the currency decision, which worsened the constraint, and it does not explain August 1967, by which time the economics were already being corrected.

The second is that France strangled him — that a poor state attempting genuine independence met commercial hostility and isolation from the former metropole, and that the 1967 monetary agreements were a capitulation extracted rather than an error confessed. The volume accepts that French pressure was real and is documented, and answers that it does not change the analysis: a ruler who is forced to retreat and then declares his revolution endangered is still a ruler who cannot let the doctrine be wrong, whoever forced the retreat.

The third is the temptation this project always refuses: to reach for a villain. Keïta was not corrupt, did not enrich himself, did not build a camp, and died poor and imprisoned. He was an able man of real convictions who took a poor country's worst structural problem and made it worse, and then could not say so. That is a more useful and more disturbing finding than a monster would have been.

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V. What This Case Does to the Inquiry

The framework required this volume to test a published claim, and the claim survives with a refinement it should now carry.

The revised claim was that an administrative formation does not prevent a ruler from starting a repression, but that the absence of an unfalsifiable doctrine leaves him able to end one. Mali sustains it and specifies it further. Keïta held the doctrine, and when his programme failed he escalated rather than stopped — where Houphouët-

Boigny, holding no doctrine, stopped. But Mali also shows that such a ruler is not simply irrational: he corrected the policy, publicly and expensively, five months before the escalation. The refinement is therefore this. **A doctrine held as beyond refutation does not prevent a ruler from admitting that a policy has failed. It prevents him from letting that admission mean anything.** The failure is conceded at the level of the measure and denied at the level of the belief, and the gap between the two is closed by declaring an emergency. That is the mechanism, dated to within three months, and it is what this volume adds to the collection.

Held, as always in this project, as tested and not revealed.